

Alcohol Industries in Southern Africa Are Influencing Government Policymaking

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By *Kate Graham-Shaw*

Alcohol consumption is on the rise in Southern Africa. And nothing is being done to prevent it.

New research published by a South African team earlier this year found that the consumption of alcohol, and the prevalence of diseases associated with it, is expected to rise in the Sub-Saharan region over the next few years. Little is being done by governments to prevent this, however. The research, conducted by a number of epidemiologists specializing in addiction, found that very few policy measures were in place to discourage the use of alcohol. What is even more concerning is that alcohol industries are influencing this lack of action.

“Industries are doing all they can to stop policy interventions which will hit their bottom line,” said Professor Charles Parry, who is the Director of the Alcohol, Tobacco & Other Drug Research Unit at the South African Medical Research (SAMRC), and also helped co-author a research paper published in February 2021. “Policy interference has been highlighted in the Southern African region in a number of instances. For example, marketing policies weren’t implemented because industries said they would stop sponsoring sports games. The industry has got to some of the ministers, like the sports minister, and is influencing them.”

Alcohol is the third leading cause of preventable death in the US, according to WHO. Worldwide, around 3 million people die from alcohol-related causes per year. The governments of the US and other developed countries have recognized the strain this is causing on people’s lives and health systems, and a number of policy laws are in place with the aim of discouraging alcohol consumption. These policies usually target advertising, pricing by taxation and minimum pricing per unit alcohol, and by making it illegal to market alcohol products in certain venues (such as sports stadiums) and at certain times of the day on TV or radio.

Such policies are almost non-existent in Southern Africa, however, because of influence by industry giants, including the international beer company Heineken.

“There are quite close ties between the government and the industries in South Africa – the president of the country even used to be on the board of South African Breweries, so they are treated well and the links are very strong,” continued Prof. Parry. “We are pushing to increase tax, minimum unit pricing and to have labels with proper information, but these are all being stopped by the industry. Unlicensed outlets are also a problem – the liquor industry benefits from selling alcohol in these establishments, and hence tries to stop legislation to improve the situation.”

South Africa is not the only country in the region which has had industries interfering with governmental policies. In 2011, major alcohol industry players took the government of Botswana to court after the president tried to introduce a controversial 70% levy on alcohol sales, which was later dropped to 30% due to industry pressure.

A similar tactic was used by tobacco companies not so long ago. With tightening restrictions on advertising and selling products in developed countries, huge multi-national companies, including British

American Tobacco, turned to Africa for a market, where they benefitted from the continent's unprepared policies, and from creating relationships with government officials which allowed them to influence law-making. A large amount of people took up smoking as a result, leading to devastating health issues.

The problem of alcoholism is also expected to rise sharply in the region due to the lack of effective policies. Although some countries in Southern Africa have populations which avoid alcohol for religious or cultural reasons, the proportion that does drink does so excessively. In South Africa, it is estimated that around 20% of the drinkers drink 80% of the alcohol.

"The growth of alcoholism is on the increase," said Ray G., an official of Alcoholics Anonymous South Africa. "A great deal of South Africans have an unhealthy relationship with alcohol. It truly is a killer; for example, one quarter of emergency room admissions is alcohol related, one third of suicides has alcohol involved. It contributes significantly to the rate of serious health diseases, such as cancer, strokes. Half of all traffic fatalities in South Africa are caused by alcohol use. There is also a huge problem with foetal alcohol syndrome – the Southern African region has the highest rates of foetal alcohol syndrome in the world. A lot of HIV infections are also linked to alcohol use. The impact is vast."

The extent of damage alcohol is having on the country became clear because of three Coronavirus alcohol bans that were put into effect over the last year.

"The industry was gobsmacked when the government banned alcohol three times during lockdown," said Prof. Parry. "However, the bans showed the true damage that alcohol is doing to the society – emergency department admissions were down around 60% after the ban was imposed."

However, he believes that banning alcohol is only a temporary fix.

"Banning alcohol is not the solution – alcohol use was shown to get worse after bans were lifted, and banning would also lead to more illegal trade. We need to find ways of implementing effective policies which have been shown to work instead in order to save lives." ■